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ABSTRACT

With the failure of the Pennsylvania General Assembly to adopt the governor's education reform package, the time is opportune to review the major problems with education in Pennsylvania and some actions that would relieve these problems. The main symptom of education problems, in Pennsylvania as in the nation as a whole, is weak academic performance. Contributing factors include: (1) the equity issue in educational finance; (2) the limited leverage schools possess in children's lives; (3) the lack of clear, unambiguous academic standards and expectations; (4) the lack of reliable data about educational results for parents and the public; (5) the limited consequences of poor academic performance; (6) the lack of systemic accountability for educational results; (7) the fact that power in education rests with the producers and not the consumers; (8) near-monopoly control of education by the establishment; (9) gridlocked educational decision making; (10) the complacency of average Americans about their own schools; (11) antiquated educational designs; and (12) the persistence of old-fashioned and incorrect educational policies and practices. Fundamental reforms are needed with regard to power and authority, standards, assessment, response to diversity, school choice, and professional development. Vision, courage, and persistence will be necessary to bring such reforms to pass. (SLD)

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Returning to Education Reform.

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THE COMMONWEALTH FOUNDATION
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ISSUE BRIEF

RETURNING TO EDUCATION REFORM

INTRODUCTION

How are algebra, an algebraic expression, and a polynomial defined? How is a lateral trinomial formed? Write a homogeneous quadrinomial of the third degree. What is the distance from the equator to either pole in degrees and in miles? Name the states on the west bank of the Mississippi River and the capital of each. Name four principal ranges of mountains in Asia and three in Africa. Name four Spanish explorers and state what induced them to come to America. What events are connected with the following dates -- 1565, 1607, 1620, 1664, and 1775?

The questions posed above are a small sample from an entrance examination to enter public high school in Jersey City, New Jersey. In order to begin high school, students were required to pass this extensive and challenging test in 1885.

These questions are difficult for many adult Americans, even ones who are considered well educated, to answer correctly in 1996. This is a reflection of the changes in our school system during the last century as well as our changed expectations for this societal institution.

As Pennsylvanians begin a new year, the Ridge Administration ends its first full year in office at the same time that Commonwealth schools have completed half of their 1995-1996 academic year. With the failure of the General Assembly to adopt Governor Ridge's education reform package, either in comprehensive form or as a trial package, perhaps this would be a propitious time to review the major problems with education and some discrete areas and actions where the Administration could act to improve the state's schools -- outside of the comprehensive package.

The sad state of education in Pennsylvania was a topic for public policy observers throughout last year. For example, Dave Boldt of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* acknowledged that the Keystone State is currently considered an "educational backwater." He reported that the late Richardson Dilworth referred to the state in private conversations as "The Dumb Belt," the center of a geographic area marked by low student test scores. This was a reaction to state students' chronic poor showings on the SAT and the National Assessment for Educational Progress coupled with abysmal rates of students continuing on to higher education.

Citizen concern about educational quality is not unique to Pennsylvania, however, and this concern surfaced in a unique way for the first time in our nation's history as the new year dawned. A January 1996 *USA Today* national poll has revealed that Americans are more concerned about education than any other area of public policy. The rise of education to the top of the public's policy agenda is an unprecedented development, but one that might have been predicted as one considers mounting citizen anger and frustration over this problem. This anger manifested itself in Chester in September 1995 when 30 parents seized the office of the superintendent of the Chester Upland School District on the first day of classes.

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PROBLEM AREAS

The main symptom of the nation's and the state's education problems, however, is weak academic performance. While this ailment is easy to pinpoint, it is resistant to treatment due to a dozen factors. The first such factor is the equity issue in educational finance. Many people who are rightly concerned about this issue, such as Jonathan Kozol, do not extend their concern past poorly funded urban and rural schools to acknowledge that despite the higher level of resources available to suburban school districts, these districts still disgorge millions of poorly educated middle-class students every year.

Second, the schools possess limited leverage in children's lives. Formal education occupies a surprisingly small portion of our children's lives. The student who faithfully attends class six hours a day, 180 days a year, from kindergarten through 12th grade, will have spent just 9 percent of his total life span within the confines of the school. The other 91 percent is spent elsewhere, and the hours students spend in school are effectively lessened by the school discharging its federal and state mandates such as addressing AIDS, drugs, and teen sexual activity.

Third, the schools, despite the state's adopted educational outcomes, lacks clear, unambiguous academic standards and expectations. For example, one of Pennsylvania's outcomes is that students will "understand complex oral messages." Does this mean that students should be able to decipher rap music? Rather than offering clear definitions of these outcomes along with indicators of whether students had mastered them, the state simply delegated that task to its 501 school districts. Hence, the state could have 501 different interpretations of these outcomes.

Fourth, parents and the public possess little reliable data about educational results. Therefore, not only has the nation had difficulty locating clear destinations for our educational journey, but the nation has also had serious troubles establishing readable mileposts along the trip. While nationwide data is acceptable, most parents cannot secure timely, intelligible information about how well their own children are progressing and how their children and local schools are doing in comparison with the rest of the state, country, and globe.

Fifth, students rarely experience few real consequences for their poor educational records. Many business employers of teenagers seem not to care much about their academic performance. Many universities and employers do not differentiate greatly between students who excel in school with a schedule of demanding courses and the students who study and learn little, scraping by with C's and D's. Al Shanker, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, has repeatedly singled out this factor as a source of mediocrity for our school system.

Sixth, there is no systemic accountability for educational results. This has been a constant theme for presidential hopeful and former Secretary of Education, Lamar Alexander, as he observes that teaching is the only profession in which one is not paid extra for excelling at his job. Not only are no rewards given to those who excel, but no sanctions are brought to bear against those teachers who generally fail to educate their students.

Seventh, power in educational public policy rests with the producers, not the consumers. Public education should serve the public interest and be accountable for its performance, but this is not the case. The American education establishment jealously harbors most of the vast power accorded to education authorities. This establishment consists of the two mammoth national teachers' unions -- the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT); education administrators and their organizations; compliant and docile state and local school boards; textbook and test publishers; the PTA, which foremost serves the interests of teachers, not parents; colleges of education; and many state legislative education committees, which are comprised of present or former educators.

Eighth, this education establishment identified above possesses near-monopoly control of this area of public policy. As all savvy consumers realize, monopolies are not responsive to consumer preferences, and government monopolies will be less so.

Ninth, education decisionmaking across the country, not just in Pennsylvania, is gridlocked.

This monopoly's chief goals are not to improve and strengthen their performance, but to preserve itself, its clout, the status quo, and the resources at its disposal. This status quo is facilitated by complex layers of local, state, and federal regulations that apply to the schools and are implemented by overstaffed and generally unresponsive school district bureaucracies.

Tenth, Americans possess what Chester Finn calls "retail complacency." Most Americans think their own school is fine even if they believe that the nation's schools are "at risk." Only 22 percent of respondents gave high grades to the nation's public schools while 70 percent awarded high marks to the school their children attended.

Eleventh, our schools were designed for the last century. The American school year is designed for the agrarian age with a school day constructed for a time when mothers were home by 3 p.m.; primitive institutional technology; obsolete notions of how children learn; and dull learning materials.

Finally, the education profession clings tenaciously to bad ideas. Some of these include:

* There is not much wrong with schools;
* Whatever may be wrong is the fault of society;
* Educational competition is harmful;
* Knowledge is passe, what matters are cognitive skills;
* Acquisition of self-esteem is more important than acquisition of knowledge;
* Race and ethnicity should determine what a child learns;
* There should be no ability "tracking";
* Only graduates of teacher-training programs should be allowed in the classroom.

The difficulty of addressing this wide array of formidable problems is clear. The politics of education are as intractable as any in the nation. To achieve meaningful reform is next to miraculous as one considers the vastness, lethargy, decentralization, and ingrained beliefs of this huge enterprise with the layers of contract, custom, ideology, law, and regulation that surround it.

THE ROADS TO REFORM

Fundamental reforms need to be pursued in at least six major areas. The first area in which reforms must be pursued is the area of power. We need major shifts of authority and control over resources from producers to consumers and from experts to civilians. This means giving parents, taxpayers, elected officials, and community leaders far greater say over what schools need to accomplish, how the schools will be held accountable for this task, and how children and schools will be matched with one another. The community must be given the power to determine the ends of education, and these ends must serve the interests of the consumers, not providers. The professional members of the education establishment should be allowed to retain the responsibility for making decisions about the means of education, once the ends have been agreed upon.

Such a shift of authority would be a significant step and is vital if other reforms are to follow. This type of development could lead to new forms of educational goverance. For example, governors, legislatures, mayors, and city councils could be given direct control of school systems rather than the semi-autonomous board and superintendent structure that is present in most places.

A shift in power and responsibility over the schools might lead to breaking vast school systems into smaller and more manageable units. As recently as 1960, Pennsylvania had 2,244 public school districts. Consolidation in many areas has gone too far so that the state now has numerous school districts that are too large--either in student population or in geographic size--to educate students effectively. For example, the state has eleven school districts that exceed 375 square miles.

The Governor's proposed choice program would effectively address the question of power by enabling families to select from among alternatives; ending coercive assignment of pupils to schools; and rewarding schools and teachers who perform well.

The second area of reform must be in standards. Any successful enterprise begins with clarity about its expectations. Pennsylvania must spell out in clear, unambiguous terms what students should learn and be able to do before they graduate. This was one of the hopes of some early supporters of outcome-based education in the state; however, the concept was quickly seized by

numerous special interest groups who wished to engage in social engineering and the idea of creating world-class academic standards was lost in the ensuing chaos.

In order for standards to have a real effect, the state also needs reliable and accurate assessments of student and school performance vis-a-vis those standards. Not only does the state need trustworthy information about student performance, but it also needs accountability mechanisms that will invoke meaningful consequences for all school personnel.

The fourth area of reform to be addressed after accountability is educational diversity. Children differ substantially in learning styles, temperament, and personal preference. Families differ in the types of educational experiences they desire for their children. Teachers differ in expertise, passion, philosophy, and style. Therefore, rather than attempting to standardize all schools, the state should welcome and promote educational diversity or pluralism. Let schools compete with one another based on their distinctive programs. Governor Ridge's charter school proposal represents a start in this area.

A complementary area of reform to educational diversity is school choice. School choice is an essential element for any comprehensive educational reform that is to be meaningful and long-lived. Families must be able to select their children's schools from a broad and varied array of choices. In order to make these choices, parents would greatly benefit from the establishment of school report cards. Senator D. Michael Fisher of Pittsburgh has been a champion for this reform for more than five years. He argues that school report cards would not only provide useful information for parents, but they would also supply a long-term view of school progress over time.

The final area of reform is the area of professionalism. An institution is only as good and as capable as the people that comprise it. Excellent teachers are priceless, and they should be treated as professionals. In return, they should behave like professionals, behavior far different than that found increasingly around collective bargaining forums. Uniform salary schedules that treat everyone alike, regardless of performance have no place in a true profession. Likewise, the ability to strike and the presence of lifetime tenure are also antithetical to true professionalism. Schools must be operated for the benefit of their consumers--the students--not their producers.

Other measures that involve issues of professionalism that should be adopted by the state include bolstering and promoting its little known alternative certification program; replacing four-year education programs with five-year programs; ensuring sabbaticals are meaningful by accepting Senator David Brightbill's idea of abolishing travel as an acceptable reason for one; and promoting additional school-business partnership programs to replace "general" programs which prepare students neither for a profession or a trade.

CONCLUSION

Reforming education continues to be an immense task. Nonetheless, it may be the most important task facing government today. Many observers have compared a sound educational system to a strong national defense. To establish such a system, vision, courage, and persistence are necessary. Perhaps successful reform will require a synthesis of the 1960s reformers' desire to humanize the school along with the 1980s reformers' commitment to high academic standards.

If Pennsylvania cannot adopt comprehensive education reform now, why should we tarry from implementing discrete reforms that will improve the future for the current as well as future generations?

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February 1996

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